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AUTHOR Sanacore, Joseph
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ABSTRACT

Helping children gain an early sense of success in literacy is vital to their growth since it creates a foundation for future success. Because of learning difficulties demonstrated in early development, which may be triggered in part by changing modern lifestyles, teachers need to be sensitive to the issue of preventing learning problems from becoming serious disabilities. Demonstrating sensitivity to the child's emerging literacy and prior knowledge are steps in the right direction, and these can be aided by informal evaluation (which replaces standardized testing with observation, interaction and analysis) and a whole-language method of language instruction. These approaches can help children be successful during their school careers and throughout their lives. (One figure is appended.) (SG)

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Success in Literacy through Early Intervention

by Dr. Joseph Sanacore
Department of Reading,
Language, and Cognition
Hofstra University
Hempstead, Long Island,
N. Y. 11550

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During the past twenty-five years, I have been an elementary and secondary school teacher, a K-12 language arts coordinator, and a professor of reading, language, and cognition. From these experiences, I have become increasingly sensitive to the need for early intervention. Helping children gain an early sense of success in literacy is vital to their growth and development since it creates a foundation for future success and self-worth. Ideally, every positive action a preschool or primary school teacher takes is considered an early intervention that prevents subsequent problems from developing in children's lives.

Teachers need to be especially sensitive to this issue of prevention because learning difficulties demonstrated in children's early development could become major learning disabilities, if unattended. Compounding this problem are demographic trends causing disruptions in children's lives. A high divorce rate, more single parent households, and an increase in families with two working parents are only a few of the societal changes that have affected children's lifestyles. If these young children experience both academic and personal difficulties, they most likely will be unable to cope with this double "whammy." Consequently, they may begin the negative cycle of failing, of developing low self-esteem, and of disliking learning.

What educators must do is stop this destructive cycle through preventive strategies. The following considerations are therefore supportive of early intervention. Although

they are not comprehensive, they do reflect appropriate efforts for helping young children develop a foundation for success in literacy.

Preschool: What Kind?

The timing for preschool education is at its best. Large numbers of women continue to join the work force and thus are in greater need of having their young children supervised. Parents also are more aware of the benefits of preschool education and are attempting to select the most suitable environment for their children. Not surprisingly, the preschool market has been growing steadily with more nursery schools initiated today than at any other time in U. S. history. Such growth is both positive and negative since some of these preschools provide a developmentally appropriate environment while others emphasize paper-and-pencil tasks, isolated skill exercises, and other fragmented activities.

The best type of early intervention supports the concept of play as an important part of a young child's experience. Play is essential because it promotes children's social, affective, and cognitive growth (Leeper, Witherspoon, & Day, 1984; Scarr, Weinberg, & Levine, 1986). Through play, children express in natural ways their view of the world as they comfortably engage in a variety of activities, such as drawing, coloring, pretending, using manipulatives, listening and responding to interesting stories

being read aloud, becoming actively involved in storytelling, and creating their own stories. These and other developmentally appropriate activities help children to better understand their world, to expand their oral language, to develop a better sense of story language and story structure, and to enjoy communication. As important, the children benefit from growing socially and emotionally with a community of peers. This type of environment needs a flexible, humanistic teacher who values children's individual background of literacy experiences. For example, the teacher respects and is able to nurture children who already have taught themselves to read or who have experimented with writing (or scribbling) letters to parents and peers. Such valuing of what children can do encourages early success as it supports a philosophy of emerging literacy.

Emerging Literacy

When children enter elementary schools, they may experience traditional settings that focus on the use of reading readiness books, exposure to the alphabet in isolation, memorization of numbers in sequence, and, of course, preparation for the Metropolitan Readiness Test. In a recent study, Freeman and Hatch (1989) focused on kindergarten report cards used in Ohio public schools and their relation to developmental theory. From the results of their analysis, the researchers concluded that (1) kindergarteners are expected to achieve mastery in work habits and in math

and reading readiness, (2) there is an emphasis on an academic kindergarten influenced by the behaviorist perspective rather than by the maturationist or interactionist one, and (3) the marking systems negatively evaluate the young children. Although these findings are limited to Ohio, the literature of the field suggests that similar approaches are dominating in other parts of the United States (Davis, 1980; Moyer, Egertson, & Isenberg, 1987; Smith & Shepard, 1987; Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986; Webster, 1984).

This trend toward external demands, however, is in direct conflict with children's developmental needs, which reflect a yearning for constructing meaning in natural contexts. In addition, as mentioned previously, young children already possess a growing repertoire of literacy knowledge that is used in making sense of their world. According to Clay (1989), five year olds entering school have literacy skills, but they vary significantly among individuals. In observing these children, Clay (1989, p.v) found:

> One child knew a great deal about books; another had explored writing. One was proud of being able to recognize all the family names; another could write most of the letters of the alphabet. Some had clusters of skills, and some had no experience in some of these areas. It was rare to find a child who did not have some literacy knowledge on entry to school.

Such observable behavior suggests that children have a natural zest for wanting to be literate and that literacy development is individual as well as continuous. This perspective negates the traditional view of readiness which implies that children reach a stage in development when they are suddenly able to write and read. Instead, literacy learning should be understood as a process that steadily builds on previous experiences. In a sense, emerging literacy keeps emerging (Clay, 1989).

Whole Language

Interestingly, a belief in emerging literacy sets the stage for a success-oriented whole language classroom. Although the whole language philosophy means many things to many people, most enthusiasts would agree that children learn best in natural environments and that educators should be aware of why they are doing what they are doing with children's literacy learning. Consequently, understanding the whole language philosophy is essential for applying it to the classroom context. Goodman (1986, p. 34) provides a perspective on whole language by indicating what it rejects:

- isolating skills sequences
- slicing up reading and writing into grade slices, each slice neatly following and dependent on prior ones

- simplifying texts by controlling their sentence structures and vocabulary, or organizing them around phonic patterns
- equating reading and writing with scores on tests of "sub-skills"
- isolating reading and writing instruction from its use in learning, or in actual reading and writing
- believing there are substantial numbers of learners who have difficulty learning to read or write for any physical or intellectual reason

Goodman (1986) stresses the importance of readers using their prior knowledge as they construct meaning during reading. Effective readers also guess or hypothesize about what will occur in the reading material, and they monitor their reading to determine if they predicted correctly or if they should self-correct to make sense of the text. Another principle of whole language is that writing be effective by making sense to the intended audience and that it be efficient by including only enough information to be understood. Goodman also highlights the importance of the three language systems interacting in reading and in writing instruction: the semantic (meanings), the syntactic (sentence patterns), and the graphophonic (sound and letter patterns). Within this pragmatic context, comprehension of text is the major goal of readers, and expression of meaning is the major goal of writers. Goodman cautions, however, that readers and writers are strongly limited by their prior knowledge.

Activating Prior Knowledge

An essential strategy for nurturing children's early success in literacy is to help them become aware of their prior knowledge and associate it with reading and writing activities. This schema-oriented view of learning is supported by Adams and Bruce (1982, p. 23) who state, "Without prior knowledge, a complex object, such as a text, is not just difficult to interpret; strictly speaking, it is meaningless."

Fortunately, a number of worthwhile strategies are available for activating children's prior knowledge and for linking it to learning activities. For example, before engaging children in the reading or writing of a grandparent theme, the teacher might ask: "What do you think about when you hear the word grandparent?" Responses might include "takes me to the park," "lives in Florida," "plays with me," "reads to me," "happy," "blind," "sick," "Alzheimer's," "works," "takes care of me," and "dead." As the teacher places children's responses on the chalkboard, he/she stimulates class discussion, highlighting the importance of each child's contribution.

A more structured approach is to associate the children's discussion with a literacy map or web. Thus, responses to the grandparent theme might be linked as in Figure 1. A map or web helps children to better visualize the relationship of their responses to important categories

and thus to better understand, retain, and apply pertinent prior knowledge.

From the class discussion or the more structured approach, children usually have more to bring to a related activity concerning writing, reading, or listening to a read-aloud session about a grandparent (or another topic or theme). The teacher may then select a variety of children's literature related to the thematic unit. For example, the following children's books support the grandparent theme:

Rose Blue's Grandma Didn't Wave Back

Ron Brooks' Timothy and Gramps

John Burningham's Grandpa

Tomie de Paola's Now One Foot, Now the Other

Norma Farber's How Does It Feel to Be Old?

Patricia MacLachlan's Through Grandpa's Eyes

Elaine Moore's At Grandmother's House

Helen Oxenbury's Grandma and Grandpa

Cynthia Rylant's Miss Maggie

Ruth Sonneborn's I Love Gram

Charlotte Zolotow's My Grandson Lew

These and other materials are enjoyed more thoroughly when children's prior knowledge is activated and associated with the materials. This approach also supports the predictive ability and the growing fluency of these developing readers and writers. With such a successful foundation, children are more likely to continue their zest for using and appreciating language.

What about Evaluation?

As teachers continue to nurture children's literacy learning in a naturalistic context, the issue of evaluation inevitably surfaces. Typically, many school districts in the United States administer readiness testing in kindergarten and other standardized testing throughout the primary grades. This type of assessment reflects a subskill orientation which is dichotomous to a natural learning environment. Such an overt mismatch of learning and evaluation frustrates children and provides inadequate information concerning their prior knowledge, their comprehension of complete stories, their authentic writing, their love of language, and other growth patterns.

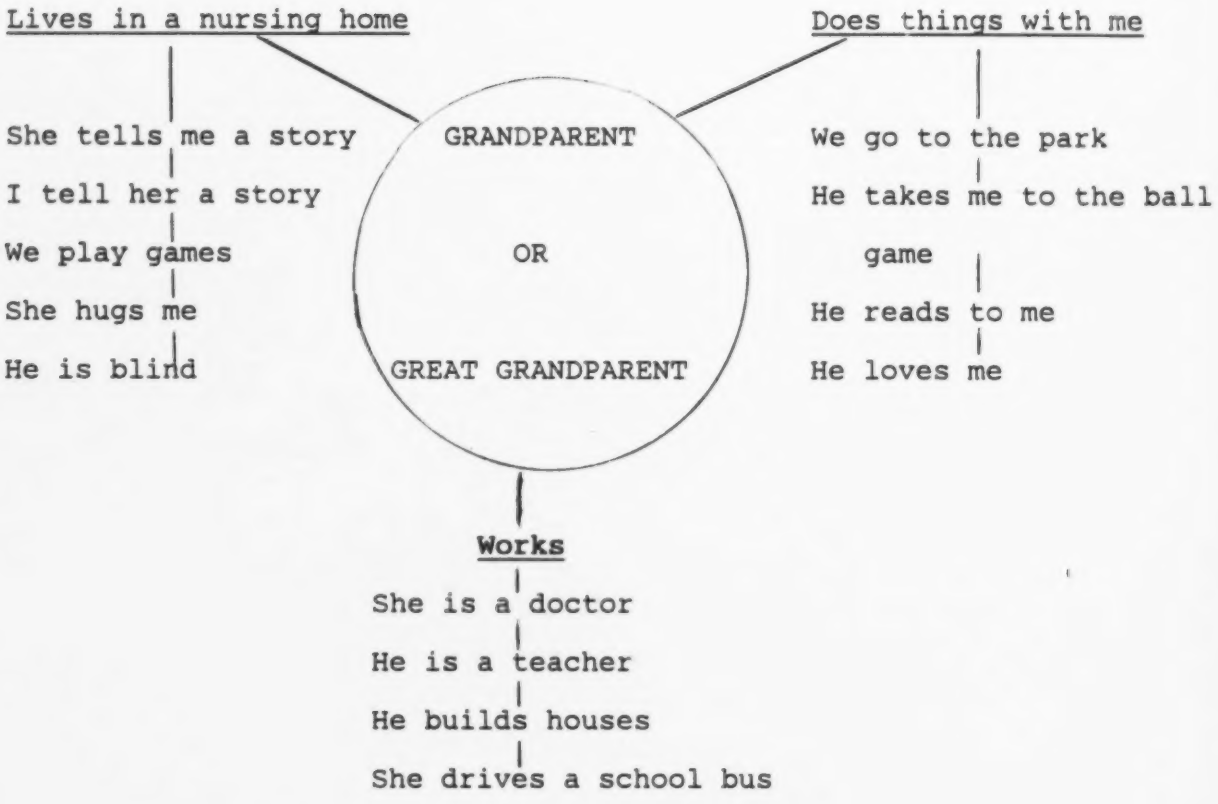
A better approach to evaluation is to eliminate all standardized testing from, at least, kindergarten to third grade and to replace it with ongoing kidwatching strategies (Marek, Howard, et al., 1984; Goodman, 1989). Kidwatching involves observing, interacting with, and analyzing children's behavior during writing, reading, listening, speaking, art, drama, and other language-oriented activities. The important consideration here is that kidwatching is a continuous process of evaluating children's growth while teaching and learning are occurring; it is different from typical standardized testing which takes place once a year and which does not consider the daily dynamics and frustrations of teaching and learning.

Observing involves viewing children's performance from a distance. The classroom teacher may decide to observe a student working individually, a child working in a group, the whole group working together, or the entire class; the purpose of observing is to determine use of language, leadership, problem solving, and collaborative abilities. Interacting involves conferencing, participating in small-group and whole-class discussions, posing pertinent questions, and reacting to students' journal entries; the purpose of interacting is to determine students' current knowledge and to stimulate their thinking beyond this current state of thought. Analyzing involves in-depth approaches, such as miscue analysis (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 1987) and careful attention to spelling development (Read, 1971); the purpose of analyzing is to consider linguistic insights while determining children's knowledge of language and their development in language use. According to Goodman (1989, p. 8), in most cases, these three types of evaluation are overlapping and integrated. "They are strong evaluation tools, especially when they are used in concert. Each can help confirm the information gained from the use of the others." Educators should consider these approaches to evaluation because they focus on what children can do during literacy learning and they provide better instructional direction then does standardized testing.

Summary

Helping children to achieve success in literacy is easier to discuss than to carry out. Common sense, however, supports a thrust toward early intervention. Considering today's problematic society, children are in greater need of school-related help, especially at the preschool and primary school levels. Providing the right kind of preschool experience and demonstrating more sensitivity to emerging literacy, whole language, prior knowledge, and informal evaluation are steps in the right direction. These approaches, of course, are not new, nor are they intended as a panacea. They simply attempt to provide a developmentally appropriate foundation for helping children to be successful during their school careers and throughout their lives.

Figure 1: Structuring Information from Class Talk



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